**“Waitin’ on Roosevelt”: Langston Hughes’s “Ballad of Roosevelt”**

The relationship between African Americans and Franklin D. Roosevelt presents something of a paradox. On the one hand, Roosevelt never endorsed anti-lynching legislation; he accepted segregation and disenfranchisement; and he condoned discrimination against blacks in federally funded relief programs. On the other hand, Roosevelt won the hearts and the votes of African Americans in unprecedented numbers. African Americans who supported left-wing parties, however, were more likely to be critical. Langston Hughes, a playwright, poet, and novelist, became a socialist in the 1930s. Although he did not join the Communist Party, he spent a year in the Soviet Union and published his works in magazines sympathetic to liberal, socialist, and Communist causes. In Hughes’s “Ballad of Roosevelt,” which appeared in the *New Republic* in 1934, the poet criticized the unfulfilled promises that FDR had made to the poor. Hughes’s style in this poem showed his distinctive merging of traditional verse with black artistic forms like blues and jazz.

Ballad of Roosevelt

The pot was empty,

The cupboard was bare.

I said, Papa,

What’s the matter here?

I’m waitin' on Roosevelt, son,

Roosevelt, Roosevelt,

Waitin' on Roosevelt, son.

The rent was due,

And the lights was out.

I said, Tell me, Mama,

What’s it all about?

We’re waitin' on Roosevelt, son,

Roosevelt, Roosevelt,

Just waitin' on Roosevelt.

Sister got sick

And the doctor wouldn’t come

Cause we couldn’t pay him

The proper sum—

A-waitin on Roosevelt,

Roosevelt, Roosevelt,

A-waitin' on Roosevelt.

Then one day

They put us out o' the house.

Ma and Pa was Meek as a mouse

Still waitin' on Roosevelt,

Roosevelt, Roosevelt.

But when they felt those

Cold winds blow

And didn’t have no

Place to go

Pa said, I’m tired

O’waitin' on Roosevelt,

Roosevelt, Roosevelt.

Damn tired o‘ waitin’ on Roosevelt.

I can’t git a job

And I can’t git no grub.

Backbone and navel’s

Doin' the belly-rub—

A-waitin' on Roosevelt,

Roosevelt, Roosevelt.

And a lot o' other folks

What’s hungry and cold

Done stopped believin'

What they been told

By Roosevelt,

Roosevelt, Roosevelt—

Cause the pot’s still empty,

And the cupboard’s still bare,

And you can’t build a

bungalow

Out o' air—

Mr. Roosevelt, listen!

What’s the matter here?

Source: Langston Hughes, “Ballad of Roosevelt,” *New Republic* 31 (November 14, 1934): 9.